

LINING UP

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A creative, multi-genre collection that includes three personal essays (non-fiction) and two short stories (fiction). The pieces in this collection primarily focus on the themes of loneliness and waiting. It includes pieces dealing with homosexual relationships, friendships and heterosexual relationships.

Collection includes the essays "The Line," "Why We Don't Talk about Christmas," and "Boys Who Kiss Back," and includes the short stories "I Am Allowed to Say Faggot" and "Dear Boy."

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PART I  
CRITIQUE AND ANALYSIS

## Preface

### *To begin:*

The first piece of advice I received about writing was from my grandmother. She told me to begin every story at the beginning. When she said it, I smiled and slowly nodded. I was 18 and couldn't wait to walk away and roll my eyes. It was so very obvious and stupid.

Now, though, at 24, I struggle with this concept every time I write. I can never decide where to begin a story; I am never sure what the beginning really is. It could be the first event in the chain, maybe the first interesting part, or the first thing the reader needs to know. Some of my stories and essays benefit from beginning with background information and exposition, but more often, my pieces begin best if not in the middle of the action, then at least in the middle of a thought.

My essay "The Line" has been through more than a dozen beginnings. Originally, the essay began the day the line began—when the central event started. Then, it jumped two weeks into the future to beginning with the day I first heard about the line—when the story started for me. The final version begins with what journalists call a hook and what English teachers call a fragment. But it's interesting and it sets the scene. The first lines of the essay call to mind, for any reader familiar with Hollywood's famous Walk of Fame, a very specific place, a place that can be instantly pictured in their minds. They also orient readers with the tone of the piece: sarcastic, cynical, funny but critically thought-out and meaningful. Jokes that mean something.

My short story "I Am Allowed To Say Faggot." begins with the title. It's a move I'm still not sure will go over entirely successfully, but nonetheless a move I like. It's what I think all titles should be: both interesting and closely tied to the center of its piece. It also happened to be what I look for in a great first line: both curious and real, so much so that it is almost impossible to escape from the story. For a long time, when this piece was non-fiction, it was just the first line, and I struggled to find a good title. It seemed to work as both, and I like the dialogue it creates between the title and story. As a first line, it begins the story at its true beginning: honest to the point of brutality.

"The Boys Who Kiss Back" begins at the most superficially interesting place: kissing. It does not, though begin at the true beginning, because almost immediately it goes back in time to how I got to that kiss. It begins where the story begins; that kiss inspires all of the reflection and understanding that comes through in the rest of the essay. The events of the past that get narrated after that kiss were, at the time, seen by me through the lens of that kiss, and so it is in the essay.

*Before the beginning:*

I haven't though, begun at the beginning. Before there is a first line, there is thinking and I can't even begin to think through a story without first compiling my imagined audience. It is appropriate that the first advice I got as a writer came from the first person I ever imagine as my reader. My grandma, my mother and my sister are the three people I think of as I prepare to write. Sure, there are things my



grandmother would never understand, jokes my mother will only pretend to find funny and things my sister will consider "gimmicky cop-outs." But I need them all there, in order to plan or revise an essay.

I want the things my grandmother will no doubt understand (loss, sense of self, anger, flaws, mistakes, lessons learned and, of course, self-implication) to be the most important things in my pieces. They should rate higher than the things she wouldn't catch (the music playing, the Star Wars references, the jokes characters make to one another) and the things she couldn't relate to (bar scenes, relationships between straight women and gay men, standing in line for 6 weeks). To keep the important things important, I imagine trying to keep my grandmother's attention, to fuel her interest in those inescapable human truths. It's OK if my mother doesn't understand all the jokes; I don't really need help being funny. What I need is help in avoiding an over-reliance on humor. If my mom's there, reading every word, I've got to add the serious, the stuff that makes her face pucker and her eyes blink and water. She could never be my gauge of what's funny and what isn't, but she will make sure there is meaning, poignancy, sympathy to meter with the sarcasm.

My sister is my worst critic, and the only one of these three who gets to read all my work. She hates that so many books suffer from she calls "a plague of the gimmick." I do not agree with everything she says and I do not do everything she suggests. Without her though, I would rely on the easy way out of a lot of things. My essay "Boys Who Kiss Back" was littered with lines like "Stop. Rewind. Go back to before I walked into this bar." She sent it back to me with 35 point red, all caps text

that read "Find a way to say this that doesn't make me roll my eyes. Stop being cute and start writing." Now, every time I read that essay, I remember all those "Rewinds," and can't imagine why I would ever cut myself so short.

*In the end:*

I hate cutting things out, I hate adding things in. I hate moving things around. At times, it feels like arrogance, an unwillingness to accept that it didn't come out gold the first time. Other times, laziness, a resistance to pushing myself to make something better, to think about something in new ways. Probably, though, it's just fear. Fear that it can't be fixed or that it will never work, that I will discover that it was a bad idea from the start. Fear that I will make it the best it can be, because then what the hell do I do with it? Fear that I will finish it, because once a story or an essay is finished, it lives independently of me.

The biggest fear, of course, is that I will get it wrong. That the piece could be great, but that I won't ever get it there. I am afraid of stories and essays before I write them, afraid of remembering it all, putting it in the right order, knowing the best voice and tone, being truly honest. That doubt is gone when I write, but once I go back to revise, it returns. And it's worse. The doubts I have repressed when writing come in waves. I notice flaws that no one else has. I can think about only the bad, the lines I've been told to "lose" and the ideas that I loved which have been called "bad." Revising makes me feel like a loser, and by then, my jokes aren't funny to me anymore.

*The middle:*

The way my writing process must look to outsiders: a crazy girl clicking the keys on her laptop so quickly it seems impossible for words to even be coming out.

Sometimes, in fact, it isn't words. I turn the spelling/grammar check off because I don't want to be slowed down by the red and green lines. If I see the misspelled word, I will no doubt stop, go back, and fix it. If I see the fragment being pointed out to me, I will no doubt get frustrated that Microsoft can't grant me a little artistic license to throw in the occasional fragment, run-on, comma splice.

I never start with the title. Titles, when given before the piece is written, seem to impose a forced destiny. This is what the piece must be about, this is what the story or essay must mean. Sometimes that works, but other times a story or an essay goes in such a different direction that I am glad I lost the boundary.

My first line is always something I judge to be mediocre. I can't belabor it—I'd never get anywhere. I know that a great first line comes, like a great title, after the story has found its meaning and direction.

For me, a story or an essay is about change, and usually, about a change. This, I know, is no ground-breaking idea. But realizing this has changed a lot about the way I write. I used to be a wildly self-indulgent writer, making all the jokes I could, trying to sneak in details of how terribly cool I am/think I am. This element still exists, certainly, if only because that is part of my non-fiction narrator's persona. I used to write stories about a conflict. Conflict is definitely an important element in most stories and essays, but more interesting, I have discovered, is the change inspired by these conflicts. It's

not the fight that matters most, but how the fight changes the characters involved in it. What the characters realize about the fight's causes. The way the narrator or main character comes to understand her faults. What she discovers about her own motives. These revelations are part of the change that is essential to making a piece interesting.

Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" helped me realize this. The conflict—the struggle between the outlaws and the family—is certainly compelling. More interesting, though, is the change seen in the grandmother and the change seen in The Misfit. The grandmother, who has been overly-critical throughout the story, is now loving and comforting; perhaps because her life is in danger, perhaps because this fear has shown her what is really important in life. The Misfit, who has been seen by the reader killing and not seeming to really be affected by it, is now seemingly regretful. These two changes take place in the last few paragraphs of the story—and are not substantial when considered the space given them. But these paragraphs are the heart of the story, they give the story all of its meaning. Every time I read it, I speculate about the motives of these characters, what drives them to change, how things would be different for them and others if they had learned these lessons a little earlier. While more detail is given throughout the rest of the story, especially to the events during the conflict between the family and the Misfit's gang, all of the story leads up to those last few paragraphs. In so doing, O'Connor was able to put almost all of the story's meaning at the end without it seeming to be just tacked on.

This is a hard concept for me to master, especially in the case of "The Line," where I want to give the story's true meaning at the end, but am struggling with

leading up to it more effectively throughout the essay. Of course, because the piece is first person and non-fiction, the task is easier in some ways. I am able to outright say that I learned something, noticed something or changed in a certain way. I am able to illustrate, through narrative voice alone, a change in the narrator. Nevertheless, I want the change to be slow in coming and I want it to become only wholly evident at the end.

*The humorous interlude:*

Something neither I nor my work could survive without is humor. John Irving's *The Hotel New Hampshire* is the first book I remember reading and being inspired by. The story itself starts rather slowly but what kept me reading was the humor. Sure, I'd loved *The Great Gatsby* and everything I read in school by Dickens. By telling a story as epic, bold and moving as Dickens, but with a humorous narrator and manic plot twists, Irving came to mean something much different to me. A dead family dog, taxidermied and hidden in a closet until it could be given as a birthday gift. A family living in a hotel, the children eavesdropping on all of the rooms through the intercom. There is physical humor in Irving, sarcasm in the narration and dialogue. There is even humor in the tragedy. From this, not only is the work more enjoyable, it also relates more closely to me. I actively seek to find the humor in things around me, and I like a narrator that does the same. I like characters who get mixed up in things that are powerful, moving, important experiences, but nonetheless experiences that can be at the very least smiled over. Because of this connection that I made to Irving's work through his use of humor,

and because of my appreciation for sarcasm especially, I make sure to include humor—whether in circumstance or dialogue—in all of my work.

It's not that I think all literature requires humor, because there are a great many pieces not known for their humor that I enjoy. What draws me to a work can be the vivid characterizations (the immigrant cousins in Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*), the strong narrative voice (Bret Easton Ellis' novels) or the setting (the small college setting, specially focusing on characters connected by a creative writing workshop in Chabon's *Wonderboys*). Often, I am interested by a work because it centers on what I see as an interesting family (Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World*, Franzen's *The Corrections*). Of course, it is clear that most or all of these works are also humorous in many of the same ways that Irving's work is. In fact, something I admire most about Irving's novels is their epic nature—the story of the entire Berry family in *Hotel*, Garp's story from conception to death in *The World According to Garp*, the story of not only Homer's entire life, but also of Dr. Larch (told in flashbacks) and the history of the St. Cloud's orphanage in *The Cider House Rules*. From these immense histories, readers can not only watch characters grow and change, but also understand their motivations, and become invested in the success and happiness of more than just the one central protagonist. In *Cider House*, there are two protagonists, Homer and Wilbur and they not only get almost equal space and time in the text, but they are both vivid and relatable.

While I don't aspire to give a character's entire life history in the space of a 10 page story or essay, I do aspire to provide enough detail to let readers understand,

through showing, why characters make the decisions they do or are inspired to change when they do. I don't want to write an epic, but I want to show the whole story, so that readers can understand why, in "The Line," the narrator is so obsessed with the Star Wars line, and then understand at the end why she changes her mind and instead starts seeking out something different. I want readers to know this without explicitly being told. In "Why We Don't Talk About Christmas," I want readers to go on the journey of culpability with the narrator, first placing blame, but slowly coming to understand, with the narrator, the assignation of her own blame.

Humor is an important element in my stories and essays and reading David Sedaris has helped me begin to learn how to use my humor effectively and more purposefully. Sedaris's essays feature humor in, the narration, the juxtaposition, the dialogue, and the descriptions. Often, he uses humor to illustrate how some things are more absurd than we realize. In his essay "Monie Changes Everything," Sedaris relates the following story, involving his father talking about a gay relative: "We go for a swim and when we get back to the hotel Phillip knocks on the door, asking if he can borrow, get this, asking if he can borrow your mother's hair dryer" (60). Sedaris trusts the audience to see his father's close-mindedness, but also uses humor to emphasize the absurdity of his father's supposed joke by including "That was it. End of story. He didn't stick it up his ass or anything, just used it in the traditional manner, but still my father found it incredible" (60). When I read this line, I realized what made it funny, and it was an important moment for me as a writer. Not only do we, as readers, find humor in his father's over-reaction, Sedaris treats us, without coming out and saying it, to the

action that would warrant such a reaction. In addition, it is, in true Sedaris style, an intrinsically funny example.

Though most of Sedaris' essays could be classified as self-dramatizing personal essays (rather than being nature essays or something more journalistic in nature), there are several kinds of essays in his body of work. In "Diary of a Smoker," he explores many incidents, all of them having to do with him smoking. In "Us and Them," he tells one fluid narrative about a family who lived next door from his childhood. A family without a TV. "Diary of a Smoker" allows for a lot of jokes because Sedaris has chosen the funniest, most telling incidents. In "Us and Them," he interlaces the humorous things that naturally occurred during the events he is narrating, jokes he makes about himself and his family as an older narrator and funny commentary about television and its impact on those who watch it. This essay includes lines like "because they had no TV, the Tomkeys were forced to talk during dinner," (5) intimating both a childish view of the world but also a commentary on his own family, and countless others.

When enumerated, the humor in my fiction and non-fiction is the similar if not the same. Much of the humor comes from the narrator mocking herself. In "Faggot," the narrator admits that she once tried to make tea by setting a mug "directly on the stove." In "The Line," the narrator mocks her obsession first with Wil Wheaton and then with the line throughout the piece. These jokes first serve the purpose of being funny, and also humanize the narrator. My fictional and real-life narrators are made more relatable once they are able to admit to and laugh at their own mistakes. Sedaris



uses the same kind of humor in "The Nui of the Living Dead," when he describes his inability to kill a mouse and resorts to trying to drown it in a bucket with a broom.

Many of my jokes come at the expense of strangers. The line members are often referred to as virgins, drag queens mocked in "The Boys Who Kiss Back," and similarly, the fashion choices of strangers are joked about by both Greg and the narrator in "Christmas." In these cases, the humor helps characterize the narrator and others who make the clever remarks, it helps describe the scene and it sets the tone both for the setting and the piece itself. In the two fiction pieces, the narrators are less likely to openly mock strangers, and it follows that there is less of this kind of humor in those pieces. Were those narrators more like myself, these jokes would be important in accurately representing who the narrator is.

David Sedaris is great at using someone's own words against them in order to create humor. His essay "Rooster at the Hitchin' Post" discusses the relationship Sedaris had with his brother Paul, nicknamed Rooster. Almost all of the humor in this essay is either at the expense of David or of Paul. A lot of the jokes are made by taking things slightly out of context, but nonetheless by letting a person's own words highlight their ignorance or superficiality.

In "Dear Boy," the notes are sometimes intrinsically funny and the note writers are let to speak for themselves, highlighting the humor in the random pieces of paper the narrator collects. In "Christmas," Matt and Patrick's words and actions are provided without much added by the narrator in order to reflect the humor in their nipple seeking

or dancing. The narrator, of course, adds humorous comments, especially to the dance scenes, in order to provide her perspective as narrator.

Dissecting jokes takes away from their humor. There are many functions for humor in creative work, but in Irving, Sedaris, and in my work, the humor is provided for more than just laughs. It helps hold interest, makes narrators relatable, and works to accurately portray characters and actions. There is value, though, in the laughs. Prose's purpose is to tell stories, to entertain. To make people think, to make people feel, to help people understand their own situations, but also to entertain. Spreading joy is one of the greatest functions of art, and humor, whether at the expense of the narrator, strangers or no one at all, serves that purpose well.

*The moment it all comes together:*

This collection is called *Lining Up* for many reasons. Initially, the title was considered because I see "The Line" to be the flagship essay in this multi-genre collection. But the title came to mean much more. Every piece in this collection explores the waiting games people play. In "The Line," it's the Star Wars fans actively waiting for a movie and enjoying that wait as much as the movie they're in line for, or the narrator who waits a year to get there. In "Why We Don't Talk About Christmas," the narrator's friends wait out her tantrum, and she seemingly waits for approval and attention. In "The Boys Who Kiss Back," the same narrator seeks out a different kind of attention, and while waiting for the right guy to come along, she settles for a slew of guys who could never be right for her. In "Faggot," the fictional narrator spends her whole

relationship waiting: first for the relationship to be sabotaged, then for her boyfriend to change his views. "Dear Boy," of course is a story about a search, and Kate spends much of that search waiting for the right piece of paper, and the right moment to reveal her real feelings to her boyfriend.

All of these characters—real or fictional—consent to wait. That's part of what makes waiting, as a theme, most interesting. This collection explores the benefits and happiness that waiting for something can sometimes bring, the ways that people occupy themselves when they are in line (literally or otherwise) and the dangers of filling time, rather than being more active in their own lives.

*Telling an honest lie (fiction vs non-fiction):*

I employ fiction and non-fiction narrative techniques interchangeably throughout my fiction and non-fiction pieces. My fiction is driven by a strong, non-fiction style narrative voice; even in the case of "Dear Boy," which is in third-person, the narrator still has a strong presence. All of the fiction and non-fiction techniques that I use have been, in various ways, provided to me by the authors I read.

In his introduction to *Stranger Than Fiction*, Chuck Palahniuk writes that "all [his] books are about a lonely person looking for some way to connect with other people" (xv). The book he is introducing is a collection of non-fiction essays, some journalistic and some creative, personal ones. And the rule applies to these pieces as well, he has sought out lonely people trying to find others with a shared passion: "For the castle builders, it's about flying a stone flag so grand, it attracts people with the same dream"

(xvi). This is echoed in "The Line," when the narrator calls the Star Wars line "a campout of the likeminded."

When I set out to write "The Line," I drew on Palahniuk's fiction, especially his novels *Choke* and *Fight Club*. These novels explored, brutally at times, fascinating sub-cultures, groups of lonely people who had found that way to connect. *Choke* focused on the struggles of a lonely sex-addict who uses support groups to find willing partners; *Fight Club* on a group of lonely guys who use fighting to escape their corporate and consumer driven lives. *Choke* is not about sex, *Fight Club* not about fighting, "The Line" not about *Star Wars*. I drew on fiction to write non-fiction because the narrative elements were similar and because in the case of the Star Wars line, I was inspired not to write fiction, but instead to reflect the truth of the events.

That is really the only critical distinction I make between my fiction and non-fiction. My fiction stories are based on either real characters or real events, but there is something about those true stories which incites in me a desire to fictionalize them. In the case of "Faggot," the character Chris is based on a real person (with a different name), and I once got fake-married in a bar, though not to the person Chris is based on. The story is a culmination of many things which struck me as particularly interesting or meaningful. Because I didn't know the real Chris very well, I could not write a very telling essay about him or my relationship with him. My getting fake-married in a bar is really the most interesting part of my short relationship with that person, so only when combined with other elements, some real and some not, did the story come together.

The story "Dear Boy," started when I read *Found* magazine. As I read it, I became curious (as the story's narrator does) about the people who found the items. I did have a temporary desire to not only find something magazine-worthy but also to write the descriptive paragraph. These desires inspired me not to write the true version, but to write a version where this literal search for something perfect related metaphorically to something larger in the main character's life. There are certainly elements of my life that I could have drawn a connection to, but I did not want to force something. The relationship part of the story grew organically as the note searching part was written. I was, once again, incited to show a truth through fiction.

Both Palahniuk, again in his introduction to *Stranger than Fiction* and Jonathan Franzen, in his essay "Why Bother?" discuss the loneliness that the act of writing forces on the writer. Franzen writes that "[t]he essence of fiction is solitary work: the work of writing, the work of reading" (66). He later writes that novelists "don't like to poke too deeply into the question of audience," implying that though a reader forces the same isolation on the reader that the act of writing has forced on him, that writer would rather not think about the man or woman holding his work, reading it alone (74). He shows the falsehood of his assertion throughout the essay, though, as it is primarily about becoming disenchanted with writing novels because of the ever-shifting mindset of the average American reader. Franzen is actively poking deeply in this question about audience, and exploring how his disconnect from the audience forces him into as much loneliness as does the act of writing. It is no wonder, then, that as writers, we are often giving our main characters a dreadfully lonely life. That is the biggest truth in

my fiction. Though these events and people inspire me to create, rather than record, they are living with my loneliness, my fears.

When thinking about the barriers between fiction and non-fiction, I often think of Dave Eggers. Eggers is a dangerous name to mention, I know. His book, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, is impossible to classify in terms of fiction or non-fiction. He writes, on the copyright information page, that it is “a work of fiction, only that in many cases, the author could not remember the exact words said by certain people...all characters and incidents and dialogue are real...all events described herein actually happened...the author has taken...liberties with chronology.” Additionally, it is hard to take seriously a narrative the author so clearly deconstructs before it even begins, including a list of suggestions for enjoying the book, a list clarifying what parts are fiction and which are non-fiction, a list of the ways the author is like the reader (including that he “falls asleep shortly after he becomes drunk”) in order to make the narrator more appealing and therefore make the book more successful. He also includes a list of the book’s major themes (including “The Painfully, Endlessly Self-Conscious Book Aspect” which he quickly admits has already become “obvious enough already”). Just before the text of the narrative begins, Eggers includes a “Complete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors” and a drawing of a stapler.

But his book, novel or not, influenced my writing in many ways. First, I came to acknowledge that, as a writer, I did not have to take myself or my work as seriously as does John Irving. When Eggers lists his symbols and metaphors, he is stripping them of their status as exalted and scholarly and illustrating that they mean simply what they

mean. With these lists, he succeeds in making himself-as-narrator more relatable to his audience; he too thinks the characters and the story are the most meaningful elements. As a young writer hopelessly engaged in the works of John Irving, it became difficult for me to think of myself as capable of writing something meaningful. Eggers' book shows that the power of a story is not found in its critical cleverness, its layered metaphor or symbolism, or in its academic applicability. The power of a story is in the story and the characters.

Eggers also does a successful job blending fictive elements into a work that is, primarily, non-fiction. The preface, written long before James Frey bungled the fiction/non-fiction barrier, explains that the dialogue has been "almost entirely reconstructed...though all true—except that which is obviously not true" (ix). This dialogue is remembered, written, "rewritten to sound more accurate," then "edited to fit within the narrative (though keeping with their essential truth)" and then finally "rewritten again to spare the author and other characters the shame of sounding as inarticulate as they invariably do, or would, if their sentences, almost invariably begun with the word 'Dude'—as in, for example, 'Dude, she died,'—were merely transcribed" (ix).

In the case of characters, he had to "change a few names and further disguise these name-changed characters" (ix). Eggers then writes that one of his characters is not a facsimile, but rather an "amalgam" (x). He discusses location and sequence changes, and discusses things which were omitted. For some, he provides reasoning,

for others, he does not. If nothing else, one can assume that the most obvious reason—he did this to make the book better, more readable—is the real reason.

Palahniuk's novels, though rather fictional, are all the products of copious research. He called phone sex lines and turned the story one of the operators told him into his novel *Invisible Monsters*. He is still speaking to the truth of something, still telling a true tale. Something about the truth inspired him to create rather than record.

John Irving has written many times that there is always something of himself in his main characters, with absent parents, a connection to wrestling, a devotion to his children. Irving is writing the truth through fiction.

Despite all that fiction and non-fiction share, there are several important distinctions. The introduction to *The Fourth Genre* asserts that creative non-fiction has four "pronounced common elements" (xxiv). These four elements—personal presence, self-discovery, flexibility of form and veracity—while defining non-fiction, also highlight the differences between fiction and non-fiction.

They all exist, to varying degrees, within my essays. "The Line," while blending a personal journey and a record of a real event, the essay traces my discovery of and reaction to the line. I experiment with the form when I jump sequence, retell part of the story in a fictional way and catalog the Star Wars paraphernalia. In "Why We Don't Talk about Christmas," I interject personal reflection, known only later, about the story as it is told.

In "The Boys Who Kiss Back," I experiment with form through sequence, going back and forward in time. This allows for the reader to trace the self-discovery that the



narrator experiences as she comes to understand her own motivations, going from seeing the kisses as merely fun to having a deeper significance.

Some of these elements, though, also exist in my fiction. In telling a fictional story that is inspired by something true, there inarguably exists self-discovery. The form may be less flexible—both of the short stories in this collection follow a more traditional narrative form—than in non-fiction, but it is still malleable.

In my short story “Dear Boy,” the form is bent to mix the main character’s search for a note with her interactions with her boyfriend. The story is still rather linear, but the two narrative elements are blended together in a non-fiction way to connect them.

In referring to veracity, the editors of *The Fourth Genre* meant the obvious: that non-fiction is true stories. Throughout this preface, I have explored the ways Irving, Palahniuk and others tell the truth with their fiction. The way “The Line” is helped by Palahniuk’s fiction. The way my fiction is informed by my life. The power of a piece is in the story, whether the events are true or not. There are important certainly important differences between the two genres, but they share common goals, and often common audiences. There are events in writers’ lives, in my life, which inspire us to imagine and create, and there are others that inspire us to reflect and record. Readers are then given a story and if we are both successful and lucky, those readers will relate, laugh, think and put the story or essay down changed.

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PART II  
CREATIVE WORKS

## The Line

The stars. Always with the stars. Ryan fucking Seacrest has a star, so I'm guessing they don't so much mean anything. The only thing the stars on the Hollywood Walk of Fame are good for, as far as I'm concerned, is that they help determine exactly where something happened. I had a photograph, for instance, of Casper break-dance fighting while waiting in the Star Wars line. Thanks to the star (Jon Hall's) just next to the foot Casper balanced on, I know exactly where he is during the fight. A year later, I could stand exactly where he danced and know I was in the right place. That's probably a little confusing. The story begins on Wil Wheaton's blog.

Wil Wheaton's the less-than-successful actor who was once the kid on "Star Trek." Unlike many other child stars (see: Haim, Corey), he takes himself and his acting career very, very seriously. And since he doesn't have much of a career, I used to read his blog and make fun of him. Apparently, Wil attempts to make his life look better by comparing himself to those he finds nerdier and somehow even less cool (see: kids in the Star Wars line). We were all related, all connected. Wil mocked an in-crowd; I mocked a guy who has thousands of daily readers.

They stood in line for six weeks for Episode III. They slept in tents, sleeping bags, or on benches constructed specifically for them. They waited on Hollywood Boulevard for six weeks just outside the Chinese Theatre. They signed in and out of The Line, clocking hours that would be tallied. Many of them woke

up on the street, caught the bus to school and then came back to the line to do homework and break dance fight, talk to homeless people on the street and answer the yellow pay phone. It was a campout of the likeminded.

Interestingly enough, waiting in line for six weeks isn't what made them such nerdy losers in Wil's estimation. It was that Episode III wasn't even playing at The Chinese. Wil's blog, and hundreds of others, plus newswire stories, reports on "Entertainment Tonight," even "The Best Damn Sports Show" all mentioned that they were standing in line at the wrong theater.

But they said, usually on their own blogs: "We're at the right theater. It's the movie that's at the wrong theatre."

Of course, once I see Wil Wheaton's blog, I have no choice but to go to The Line's website. Turns out, they've been in line for two weeks already and they have been doing all they can to bring the movie to The Chinese.

This hot linester guy with bangs in his face started a website called "The Chinese or Bust." Caroline, who flew in from Australia to wait in line and to see the last Star Wars film in the best and most famous movie theater in the world, is checking herself out of line for the first time to fly to a convention in Indianapolis to speak directly with George Lucas for about 45 seconds. She only gets the time it would take for him to sign a very expensive autograph. I'll mention that she also has to stand in a massive line at the convention, though we know that's not really a problem for Caroline. Sarah wrote a letter to the film's distribution company, who responded with an offer for free tickets to the

Arclight, the closest movie theater in LA that was showing the movie and a limo ride from the line to the Arclight. Sarah's letter comes only after Bryan Lee complains to the Grauman's manager and learns that the theatre has no control: it's the distribution company.

The Line has a banner that reads: "The Line Starts Here." Halfway through their six weeks on the street, they add a new banner, "It Started Here, It Should End Here." The first Star Wars film premiered at The Chinese and there were people standing in the Episode III line who had seen the first film there in 1977.

You say it's just a movie. They say that in some ways, Star Wars is bigger than Christianity.

I know all of this, of course, because I know all of them. The first time I went to their website, I noticed a graphic that read "CALL THE LINE!" And again, I had no choice. I had to call the line. When I tell this story to my real-life friends, it begins in this more exciting, but less true way:

So, I have the number to the pay phone outside Grauman's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles. (The person usually asks how I have the number and I just tell them that I know things). It's the best number to have in your phone when you're drunk. Because someone almost always answers it. So, one night, I called it, expecting an LA guy to answer it, because tourists never answer pay-phones, they don't have the sense of propriety. A guy answers the phone. He sounds pretty nice and I talk to him for a minute and

notice that there are voices in the background. I ask him if he's waiting for a movie and he says "Of course. Where did you think you were calling?"

"Good point," I tell him. I offer to let him go so he can get to his movie and he says he's got a while. He's laughing a little.

"What?" I ask.

"Do you really not know where you're calling? The movie doesn't start for a month."

And so it began.

I wish that was the real story, but the truth is I called the line phone sober, with the exclusive intention of making fun of the losers in line. This is before I knew about the controversy, back when I thought they were at the wrong theatre. I had a few questions in mind. "Is Yoda there?" "Are you all dressed like Jedi? Is Jedi really the plural of Jedi?" "Are you all virgins?" "Does Chewbacca have a penis? Can he have sex with human women, and then create a wookiee/human hybrid? Or is that what monkeys are?" I blame Wil Wheaton to this day for those malicious questions; he filled me with the desire to mock the line kids.

It has not escaped me: Wil Wheaton making fun of them to make himself look better and me making fun of Wil Wheaton and then wanting to call the line and ask them if, since their nerdy love of Star Wars has rendered their penises as useless as their nipples, they've just cut their dicks off.

But a girl answered! A girl! What was I supposed to do with that? Hang up, apparently. Call back later, when I was still sober. It seems like a joke that should have disappeared after one failed phone call, but I tried it again. Enter Bryan Lee.

He answered the phone in a Yoda voice. My attempt at making fun of someone was ruined when he made fun of himself first. So I laughed.

"Who is this?"

His "Yoda," sounded like "Roda."

"Asian Yoda?" I asked.

This time he laughed, dropping the Yoda voice.

I heard talking and laughing in the background. It would have been about 8 at night in LA.

"How many people are out there tonight?" I asked.

"Let me look at the pop sign." He set the phone down, a hard sound, plastic on cold metal. He picked up the phone, and I heard him dragging the sign and then his voice which said "123."

"You have a pop sign?" I asked.

"Yeah, it says Welcome to Mos Eisley Space Port, and under that it says population, and then we have Velcro numbers that we can change," Bryan said. I didn't ask about Mos Eisley because I knew it was some Star Wars thing. And I've never cared about Star Wars. My obsession, beginning at that moment,



when I learned that they had a Star Wars-themed population sign, was never Star Wars. It was the Star Wars line.

I called the line phone every day. A tradition from my first call always persisted: I never talked to a girl. After a while, I had my favorite linesters to talk to: Bryan, Grimlock, Kerry Grant. Nobody could beat Ron though. Ron never did a Yoda voice, but he quite frequently did Arnold Schwarzenegger doing a Yoda voice.

Jason joined the line to beat up dangerous homeless people and protect the line members. Jeff joined the line because he was homeless and had nowhere else to go. Mike joined the line so that—for the first time in his life—he could make friends with other fans, people like him, people who wouldn't and couldn't make fun of him. Bryan joined the line, Casper joined the line, Art, Grimlock, Ron, all 200 of them joined the line because not only did they have something to get excited about but they weren't afraid to actually get excited. They joined because they had this one-time chance to be around people they automatically could connect to, because it was the last time any of them could ever line up for Star Wars. They made easy targets for Wil Wheaton, a sarcastic girl from Texas, the Jimmy Kimmel show that taped across the street. The easiest joke is that they are freaks, outsiders. But they were in, and we were outside, watching them. They had a place.

It's hard to imagine, without pictures or videos, this idea of camping on Hollywood Boulevard, waiting to see a movie at Grauman's. Tents and tarp shanties, camping chairs and sleeping bags. This image of them that you've created, this image of them waiting in line is wrong. First, they weren't really waiting. To the tents and chairs, add portable DVD players, laptop computers, wireless internet, extension cords. Cell phones and yellow pay phones. A mailbox. A Netflix subscription. Websites. Message boards. You could IM the line.

But I always called. And the phone is how I met Jeff, whose dog Zoe was clocked into the line as well. In fact, thanks to his trip across the street to see a different movie, Zoe had more hours than Jeff did. The phone is how I met Bryan, who had quit going to high school to take his only chance to wait in the line. Grimlock, who slept in his van. Sometimes he slept there with girls, sometimes while talking about Star Wars. The phone is how I met the devoutly Catholic Ron, to whom I delivered the news that we (we?) had a new Pope and he said he always remember me for that.

So, don't imagine standing or waiting in line. Imagine a Star Wars themed campout. Don't imagine virgins, imagine guys who are now meeting and talking to girls, sleeping with girls, getting girlfriends, all thanks to the line. Imagine Hollywood Boulevard, walked on by more pedestrians than any other street imaginable. Now, maybe you can see why I'd want to join the line.

I couldn't join the line, though, not with grad school in Texas. So I settled for becoming obsessed with them. I've tried to figure out why since that first call with Bryan, when I realized how fascinated I was. Wil Wheaton, Ron, Jeff, even me, we all want a place to fit. Whether we forge it ourselves, join it on the street or on a blog, making fun of others, we're all looking for a place where being you makes sense. Maybe I didn't really want their line, just a line where being me made sense the way being a Star Wars fan on Hollywood Blvd. made sense for those six weeks.

When I would bring up a "line" or "pay phone" conversation with my friends, they would dart their eyes and change the subject. When they asked me what my "deal was" with those "virgins," I didn't have a real answer, nor did I have the social courage to stand up for my West Coast friends, so I usually added that I only called them when I was drunk. I tried to figure it out, what my "deal was."

So I couldn't get over the kids. I think that my love of nerds and my love of Hollywood came together to create something I more than loved. Sometimes, though, I think it's just that it seemed like they were having a lot of fun in the line and I wanted to join it, but at the same time, couldn't. And since my brain is incapable of reconciling wanting something and not being able to have it, it just ended up as an obsession.

The closest I could come was to call the line phone, to join their message boards, and to go to LA almost a year later, on my spring break. By then, I had

decided to make something productive out of my madness, to write about the line and to write the trip off on my taxes. I got my sister to come along, plane tickets to LAX, reservations in a hotel in Hollywood a block from The Chinese, and a rental car because, as Jeff from the line told me, nobody walks in LA.

I had a DVD documentary, home movie footage put together all slapdash by a bunch of guys who, despite as cool as I thought they were, were still guys. Girls are whistled at, cleavage zoomed in on, asses followed as they seemingly float down the sidewalk, drunk girls singing dirty songs all captured. It was almost as if they didn't have me in mind when they were making the video, like they didn't realize I would, months into the future, order the DVD wanting people, stories, light saber fights and an entire section illustrating the logistics of the line.

There was some of that on the DVD, and it helped. I got the break dance fight, interviews, an hour long section entitled "Requiem for Grauman's." The DVD was helpful, yes, but I still had to go to LA.

We'd never been, and it seemed like a cool place to go. Beverly Hills, Hollywood, Melrose, famous people, Venice Beach, Hollywood Boulevard, Long Beach, Grauman's, expensive haircuts, where the line was. In spite of all of that, I was never to be a Star Wars Line member. It did, after all, require an implicit love for the movies. I would have to find my own campout of the likeminded.

## Why We Don't Talk About Christmas

We don't talk about Christmas, my best friends and I, because we still can't figure out who should be ashamed.

"No Patrick yet," Greg says, exhaling, as we sit on the steps outside Matt's apartment.

"Give me a smoke," I say.

He picks up the pack next to him and tosses it at me. I wish I hadn't talked to him earlier so that I would be able to fill this silence with "what did you get for Christmas?" I already knew that he got a bunch of giftcards because he's too picky about his clothes and a new cell phone that takes digital pictures. We all got digital cameras for Christmas. Greg, Patrick, Matt and I. Now we could have four copies, from slightly different angles, of everything we deem picture worthy. Which is like, everything.

The first pictures I take that night are of Matt's kitchen. A bowl of what was once cheese dip but is now brown goo. A massive floor to shoulder high pile of empty beer boxes. Four tied bags of trash. The remains of a month old attempt at dipping strawberries in chocolate. The cookie sheet is where the four of us left it that night, the strawberry stems stuck in the chocolate crust.

Patrick showed up as I was getting ready in Matt's bathroom. By getting ready, I mean I was pretending I knew how to put on the make-up that my mom, or Santa, put in my stocking. I only knew Patrick was there when there

was a relentless banging on the bathroom door right behind me. First, he screams that he's about to piss himself. Then he yells that he has pissed himself and needs to come into the bathroom to clean up.

"Anyone have any extra pants?" He yells.

I give up on the make-up, maybe because I just want to be out of the bathroom and into the room full of boys who I love.

"Can I do absolutely nothing without being tormented by you? Did you completely stop the maturation process at age 10? What is wrong with you?" I say as I walk past him into the living room.

Patrick follows me, obviously not verging on pissing himself after all. The four of us walk out on to the patio to sit on camping chairs and sip on the beers that Matt has pulled out of the fridge for us.

I take a picture of myself smiling with my beer. When I look at it on the screen, I notice that some of the lipstick I tried to put on was still clinging to my lips, despite my attempts at wiping and then biting it off. I get a picture of Greg, holding his beer up next to his face and looking... bored. I show them the pictures of my sister doing yoga next to the Christmas tree. She's wearing the pajamas she got the night before, part of our family tradition. Light blue long johns with green stripes down the side. The focus of the picture is supposed to be her face, between the backs of her knees. She's making a triangle with her body, balancing on her toes and fingers. It's a funny picture.

"What is she doing?" Greg laughs.

"Yoga, I say," also laughing. "Isn't she crazy?"

"Nice ass," Matt says, when Greg passes him the camera.

I snatch it back from him and drain my beer. I roll my eyes at him so he knows that my annoyance is, like usual, playful at its harshest.

"Let's go," I say.

Before we leave, we all take pictures. With Matt's camera, we get a picture of all four us, Matt stretching one of his long arms to take it. With Patrick's and mine, we get a picture of me and Patrick, his arm around my shoulder and his finger poised to poke me in the boob. In his, I smile because I don't know he's doing it, in mine, I am laughing: my mouth open and my eyes half closed.

There are four or five pictures of Greg and I. The first didn't work because Greg thought he looked too red, the second because I was showing my teeth in my smile, which I think makes me look like a child. The third picture neither of us liked because we looked drunk and droopy eyed. The fourth we didn't really like because it looked a little like Greg was choking me with his arm around me, but neither Matt nor Patrick would take another picture of us. It was time to go. Greg wasn't even half way through his beer so I took it from him and stole a long sip.

"Bitch," he snapped.

"Yeah," I said and took another drink.

He took the beer back and finished it. We rounded up wallets, keys and cameras.

The first place we go to in the club is the beer tub. Matt or Patrick knows the girl who stands there; the girl who sells pre-made test tube shots and bottled beer. She gives us a free drink every time we buy one. Athena's free drinks are the reason I'll settle for a bar that is crowded with mostly thirty-somethings.

I take one shot, then two and grab a beer to carry around. Matt and Patrick go hit up a bartender they know from somewhere else and Greg and I launch our first lap around the club.

"What the hell is that lady thinking?" He asks as we pass a woman old enough to be our mom, wearing boots up to her knees.

"Go-go home" is the cleverest thing I can think of, so I say it.

Patrick runs up behind us and grabs me by the elbow. Come on, he says.

"Take our picture with the shot girls!"

Athena has a friend, a friend with a name equally unbelievable, but my name's Allegra, so who am I to judge? They wear themed and matching outfits.

Patrick is tugging at me.

"OK, Chill." I say.

"You can see their nipples! Hurry before they warm up!"



Greg's usual response to Patrick is to laugh and say his name. When he says "Patrick," he means "that crazy moron, he's always doing something weird, but I've got nothing better to do so I might as well watch."

We go back to the beer stand and I take a picture of the four of them: Matt, Pat and the shot girls. The guys have their arms around the girls' shoulders, fingers dangling dangerously close to the nipples, which I really can see through their red velvet dresses.

Somehow, the four of us all end up sitting at the bar in the 80s room. I had a few beers, and Matt got me to try his girlfriend's favorite drink: something blue served in a martini glass. I got one for Greg, too, wanting him to catch up, feeling a little sloppy already. Somehow over the Madonna playing at the bar, I can hear Greg's cell phone ring: Girls Just Want To Have Fun.

Greg walks into the pool and dart room to take his call. Patrick climbs up on to the back of my stool and Matt takes a picture of what ends up looking like Patrick humping the back of my head. I slide my camera to Matt and he takes the same picture again. Patrick jumps down and while Matt still has the camera poised, he gets a picture of me with the neck of my beer bottle down my throat and Patrick just behind me making a shocked and disgusted face. His mouth wide open, his eyes all squinty, his eyebrows furrowed.

Greg returns, hands me his phone. I look at it, it says "Supertan Aaron." Aaron is this guy we know who has a crush on Greg. Greg made the mistake of drunkenly making out with him at a Halloween Party. Aaron works at a tanning place and Aaron loves getting all the free stuff he possibly can from work.

I look at Greg. I hold the phone on my open palm. I am not committing to this conversation. He raises his eyebrows and shrugs.

"Yeah?"

"Hey, Merry Christmas girl," he says.

"What's up?"

"Where are you guys?"

"Oh, I get it."

"What?"

"Greg won't tell you where we are?"

"What? I mean, I just want to see you guys. None of my friends are going out tonight."

"Aaron, seriously. If Greg won't" I start, but I don't finish. I just push the button to hang up on him and I hand the phone back to Greg.

"Thanks," he says and pockets the phone.

"Why did you even answer it?"

"I don't know, it's Christmas," he says.

"So your Christmas present to the orange loser who won't leave you alone is answering his 50<sup>th</sup> phone call?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Patrick has scrawled something on a bar napkin and leaps off his chair, skips across the dance floor and hands it to the DJ. Matt can hardly contain himself. He orders another round of whatever the hell man drink he and Patrick are having. I get another beer and walk over to see Athena. I take two shots that none of my friends see; I tell them I went to pee. I hear "Pour Some Sugar On Me" start to play and I run back to the 80s room. We all run to the floor, I pause to pick up my beer from the bar. We dance and we sing.

Patrick had his scotch glass with him on the floor and I had my bottle of beer. He and I were dancing and he reached into his left pocket. I thought he was going for a cigarette, but whatever he fished out, he managed to conceal in his balled fist. I lowered my eyebrows and looked at him, but he mouthed the word "surprise" at me and I shrugged and kept on dancing. Greg skipped over and we danced in a triangle. I laughed as Greg twirled me on the floor, ours finger barely touching, our hands high in the air. I had to stop twirling after the third spin, dizziness comes easier to the drunk. Patrick grabbed Matt and pulled him into our circle and we were all singing along. Patrick held his glass in his teeth and with both hands, struggled with whatever he was hiding in his fist. He grabbed his glass with his left hand and kept his right hand tightly closed. And then, just as we all began to sing "POUR SOME SUGAR..." I noticed Patrick was actually pouring sugar all over himself. I laughed but I secretly wanted to

pretend like I didn't know him; I high fived him once he dropped the drained sugar packets to the ground, but I wished that I had a fuller beer.

Patrick held out his glass and I raised my bottle to toast him. To say he slammed his glass into my bottle would be an understatement. To say he broke his glass against my bottle and lodged shards of glass in my hand would be accurate but not really convey the depths of my drunken anger.

"WHAT THE GOOD GOD DAMN IS WRONG WITH YOU?" I yelled.

Patrick laughed. Greg rolled his eyes. Matt held up his hand to high fives all around.

"FUCK! SHUT UP."

I walked back over to the bar and pointed at my empty bottle to the bartender. I picked the glass out of my hand and pressed a bar napkin into my palm. There was only a little blood and I rolled my eyes. Greg's hand was suddenly on my shoulder and he lifted the napkin off my hand. He eyed my injuries and said "not so bad," and I replied "what a jackass."

We don't talk about Christmas, but if we did, I'd say it started there. Glass in my hand. Hurt feelings from the way Patrick laughed in my face when he saw my bloody palm. Like a little boy at a birthday party.

We hear the ominous first notes. Matt and Pat jump up from their stools and Greg and I follow. Matt has already armed Greg with his camera and I have mine.

Matt knows the entire choreographed “Beat It” dance. On calmer days, he practices with the DVD of Micheal Jackson’s music videos. He’s danced this “Beat It” dance with the DVD playing and his back to the TV screen right in front of me. He knows the whole damn dance. He’s 23 years old and he practices dances to 80s pop songs in his living room and then jumps, literally, at the chance to show his friends.

And here I stand in this club; here I bear witness to a Matt and Patrick “Beat It” dance off. This is what was on the napkin.

Greg and I get pictures of Patrick’s improvised moves and of Matt’s choreographed steps. We get the astonished crowd that applaud, clap, but mostly laugh. There is a picture of Matt, from the side, his arms outstretched; he even makes the Michael Jackson facial expressions. We get a picture of Patrick’s signature close: the slide across the floor on his knees, playing what I imagine is an air guitar. Matt always wins the dance-off because he knows what he’s doing; he’s not just snapping his arms in the air and jumping around. But I’m not sure if winning the “Beat It” dance off is something to be proud of.

Because Matt spends the next fifteen minutes on his cell phone and Patrick still refuses to apologize for slamming his glass into my hand, I’m done

with the straight boys for the night. From what I overhear, Matt seems to be making a date for later that night with his girlfriend and I'm not ready to leave. I convince Greg to come with me to the karaoke room for a while.

Oops.

That Celine Dion song from Titanic. Someone always has to sing the Celine Dion song from Titanic. Greg and I walk over and sit on the ledge at the side. I ask the waitress for a beer by pointing at my empty bottle and she nods. There's a guy sitting next to us, 25 probably and bald. Maybe cause he shaves it, maybe cause he's going bald like that.

The thing about the random drunk bald guy is I didn't remember him until I saw the picture. When I swore off two of my best friends for life on Christmas night, I spent the month of January avoiding the pictures that I had uploaded and hidden on my computer. By the middle of February, Patrick had sent me enough text messages that I was starting to waiver. I was never going to talk to him again, but there were so many times that I just wanted to call him, especially every time one of our "dancing songs" was on. So I looked at the pictures. All the pictures from Matt's apartment, all the pictures from the bar and the dance floor. I remembered how much fun we had, but my anger was already mounting again. When I saw the pictures, I remembered the bald guy. I remembered the details. Even the ones not picture-worthy.

Greg and I were in the Karaoke Room, maybe hiding from Matt and Patrick. This bald guy, he was as drunk as I was. We were flirting, I know, but I don't remember specifics. I remember laughing at something he said, something I didn't really think was funny. I laughed and let my head fall into his chest, he wrapped his arm around my back. Greg was gone.

Patrick walks in. I sit up and the bald guy rests his hand on my thigh.

"Hey, let's go."

"What? It's like, 12:45. What are you talking about?"

"Yeah, let's go." Patrick said.

"What?"

"We're ready to get out of here."

"WHAT THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH YOU?" I yelled.

Patrick walked away. At the time, I felt justified. I didn't want to go. I hated that I just had to leave when the boys wanted to. I hated that they had been making plans without me. I wanted to stay and talk to this guy, this guy who wanted to talk to me.

"My friend wants to leave so he can get laid." I said to the bald guy. I'm not sure where I got that piece of information—that Matt was the one who wanted to leave, that that's why Patrick was trying to go—but I stuck to it. Bald guy put his arm around my shoulders and tugged me back toward him. I leaned on him and sipped a beer that he handed me. Greg sat down on the other side of me.

"So, Patrick wants to leave," Greg said.

"What did you say?"

"I said cool. It's whatever."

"Ooohhh, you should not have done that," I said. Outvoted.

"Patrick closed your tab, he's got your credit card."

I don't talk about Christmas because I remember this moment without a photograph. Patrick had gotten me there. He closed my tab, he had my credit card. On Christmas, I thought he was being conniving and selfish. Now, I see that he was being funny. He probably laughed when he signed my name, he probably thought I would laugh to, before he realized that I'd become so angry.

The bald guy rubbed my back, he and I were talking. I was giggling and laughing and touching him. I'm not sure how it happened, but when Patrick came back, my head was in his lap.

Patrick grabbed me by the elbow.

"Whoa, what the fuck?"

"We are going. Now." Patrick said. Talking to me, looking at the bald guy.

"Whatever. I'm not fucking leaving because you want to get Matt laid," I said.

"We all want to leave, dude. What are you talking about?"

"Fuck you. Whose all of us? Matt? So he can go fuck his girlfriend?"



"I want to leave, Matt is going to go to bed and Greg said he wanted to go, too."

"I'm not fucking stupid. I know Matt was talking to his girlfriend earlier. Greg just said that because Greg is like that, he goes with the flow. FUCK PATRICK, GET A CLUE!"

Patrick grabbed my arm.

I spun away from him. The bald guy and Greg were both still sitting just behind me.

"FUCK OFF."

"Seriously, let's go."

"I'm not leaving just because you want to fucking go, fuck that Patrick."

"Why are you so angry? Please, come on."

I drank my beer. I stood there. I didn't respond. I looked at the bald guy. I realized I wasn't just mad because they'd teamed up against me. I didn't just want to stay so I could keep drinking or dancing. I wanted to stay with this random guy, talk to a boy who wanted to talk to me.

"If you want to leave, then I guess you have two fucking choices Patrick, suck it the fuck up and wait or FUCKING LEAVE."

Patrick grabbed my arm.

The bald guy suddenly grabbed Patrick by the wrist and told him to "stop fucking touching" me. I just stood there. Patrick looked at me, his wrist still being squeezed by my defender, a guy whose name I couldn't remember even

then. I didn't stop it or protest or even say "it's cool, don't worry about it."

Patrick jerked his arm free, looking at me the entire time. I knew then that I should have stood up for Patrick, but even then I couldn't stop myself. Stubborn, embarrassed, driven by my need for attention and validation, I just kept yelling.

"Fuck you leave." I said.

I must have said "fuck you, leave" five or six times because it still echoes in my mind like a song lyric I've heard a thousand times. "Fuck you, leave." I can remember my cadence, my volume, the expression I made, the heat I felt on my face.

Patrick doesn't talk about Christmas because he knows now that no matter how many times a drunk girl tells you to leave, you don't.

He left. He walked out of the karaoke room and he and Matt were gone. I drank more. I talked to the bald guy. It's a mess from here.

There's the moment where I realize that I've been left there. Greg standing in front of me. His phone in his hand.

"Call him again," I said.

"Call him again."

I don't believe it. I am thirty miles away from my parents' house where I am staying this week. It 1:30 in the morning.

There's a drink here, I don't know where it came from.

"CALL HIM AGAIN."

Greg is talking. I don't know what he's saying.

The bald guy had offered to take us home. I know that.

But I would wake my dad on Christmas night and ask him to drive to downtown Fort Worth before I would ride home with a guy who lets a drunk girl put her face in his lap. Maybe I didn't understand it then, but the guy at the center of my fit is the one guy I don't trust. It was me, all along.

Standing on the street. Cold. Patrick is coming back. I get in the back seat. We make it a block.

"I can't believe you left me there."

"I can't believe you're being such an incredibly drunk bitch."

"You left me in a bar Patrick,"

"You wouldn't come. You are DRUNK."

"You couldn't wait?"

"You told me to leave."

"Jesus. Run the fucking red light. If I'm so drunk, why are you doing what I say?"

"You are DRUNK."

"You left me in a bar, Patrick. You left me there. You left me there," I cry. I sob and gasp for breath.

"Shut-up."

"You left me there you dick!"

"You were being a cunt."

We're still at the red light. I get out of the car. Patrick tells Greg to stay in the car. I know now that Patrick thought I was just going to throw up and was telling Greg to let me puke in peace. But I'm gone. Across the street. Standing in a bay of a drive-thru bank. For some drunk reason I avoid the ATMs because I don't want to be on camera. I can't stop crying.

I call my dad, he's on his way.

Patrick pulls around. I started to realize as he made circles through the maze of one-ways that if he loved me enough to come back, and never really leave, I should have loved him enough to trust him. Realize his haste wasn't in getting Matt home, but in getting me out of there.

"Get in the car, drama queen," Patrick says.

"Fuck you." I say, and then I ... spit on his face. He wants to coax me into the car, I don't know, maybe because it's like 30 degrees outside, maybe because I'm drunk, alone and in the middle of downtown. And I spit on his face. And then laugh, I laugh like a deranged person trying to imitate a child at a birthday party.

Greg gets out.

"GO AWAY, GO THE FUCK AWAY, PATRICK."

I run across the street and into a parking garage. I stand on the first level and sob. I ask Greg why Patrick would leave me there. I can't remember his

reaction but I am sure he was placating me. Talking to the drunk girl the way you talk to a child.

Greg doesn't talk about Christmas because he wants to forget it ever happened.

Matt because he really was just trying to get laid. And in the end, he didn't.

Patrick doesn't talk about Christmas because he left me, because when he wrapped his coat around my shoulders in that parking garage, he knew it wasn't enough.

I don't talk about Christmas because I was, after all, the incredibly drunk bitch, the cunt, the child.

## The Boys Who Kiss Back

He hasn't shaved in at least 12 hours. He presses his face against mine harder. He bites my bottom lip. His left hand rubs my neck; his right runs through my short hair. He tastes like Winterfresh gum, so strongly that my tongue is searching for it in his mouth. His body is pressed against mine; my hand on his back draws him closer. Our noses graze as we move our heads from one side to another. As our pulses race, our pace becomes quicker. The bar swirls around us. I can see people watching as I peek over his ear.

As long as we are kissing, all I think of is our lips, our hands and our bodies. Not of the lipstick I am smearing on his face. Not of the voices or the music. Not of my friends lost on the dance floor. Only of him, only of me. Only of him wanting me.

But he's gay. And I'm a girl.

Wait.

Go back before I strutted into this bar with friends. Before I put on my glittery make-up. Before I picked out the perfect shirt: a violet ringer tee with "Candy Land" written in sparkly pastel pinks, greens and blues. Go back before last month when I was doing this at a party. Before last year when I went to my first gay bar. Months before that when I made my first gay friend. Keep rewinding if you want to know how this ended up happening. Without the rest, this doesn't make sense.

My junior year of college, I was sitting on my bed. My roommate and I were asking each other questions in Spanish, preparing for our oral exams. I heard our neighbors in the hall, laughing and talking. I went in the hall, hungry for a distraction from “Que hora es la....” I found one, standing in the hallway, wearing orange pajama pants and a tangerine colored t-shirt. There was a bottle of Febreze hanging from his waistband, and I stared at him.

“How do I not know who you are?” I asked. There were only 1,200 kids at the school. A person I’d never seen before was intriguing to me, and I always asked them in such a friendly way.

“Maybe because this is my first semester,” He replied.

“Maybe. How do you know these bitches?” I asked, as I pointed to my neighbors—Leah and Kristina—who both laughed.

“They know my neighbors. I live in Dean.”

“Oh. OK.”

I followed him and Leah into her room, as Kristina walked toward the bathroom. He handed Leah the Febreze and looked at me.

“What?”

“You’re gay, huh?” I am always this tactful, always this polite.

“No, my pajamas match because I am straight. I carry Febreze in my pants because I am straight.”

“Good call.” I nodded.

As Leah sprayed her sorority jersey with Febreze, we both glanced at her, and at the same time asked: "Why don't you wash it, Leah?"

"This seems a lot easier, doesn't it?" She replied. Greg and I rolled our eyes.

"Let's be friends forever." I said.

"OK. I'm going back to Dean when she's done. Are you coming?"

"Yeah."

The following week, he transferred into my Spanish class, and I spent the rest of the second semester with Greg. We ate together, studied together. We met outside of the Language Building, smoked, and went to class together. We smoked after class. I slept in his room, in his bed, and he slept on the couch—which he pretended to prefer.

Other friends of mine got upset because I was always with Greg. He and I stayed up late and got Taco Bell, took it back to the Dean Hall basement and watched Court TV until we were too tired to shout out who the killer was anymore.

A few months later, it was spring break. We caravanned to my parents' house where we dropped our bags, pet the dog and headed to the mall. Our plan for that night was to go to the "gay-borhood" in Dallas to dance and gossip, but first we needed great outfits for our debut.

So far I'm just a girl, friends with a guy, going to a club to dance. We have a ways to go yet.



I'd been to clubs before, so I was used to the darkness strangely mixed with bright lights and flashing greens, yellows, reds, pinks. I knew about the pushing and the shoving; I knew about the occasional need to use my elbows to get anywhere. I knew about the thick smoke, the dance floor, and the ways to get drinks underage. What I wasn't used to was the masses of half-naked men, all dancing together, all kissing and reaching, grabbing and singing. I wasn't used to men singing along to Britney Spears. I wasn't used to hearing the word "fabulous" so many times in an hour.

Greg and I started going almost every weekend. We'd sit on the patio and talk to everyone who walked by—drag queens preparing for a show, old men in cowboy hats, couples holding hands and couples fighting, groups of three who could only stop kissing long enough to say "hey." Sometimes we'd drag other friends from school with us—only three hours of driving round trip—but they could never get into the system. Walking in, making a lap, getting a drink from the bartender who thinks Greg is cute, cruising the dance floor, and then settling in on the porch. We'd make the occasional sweep through the club, picking up new boys to talk to. We'd smoke a lot of cigarettes, talk about everyone we saw, rarely very nicely, saying things like: "what is he thinking with that trashy little skank?" or "how could he leave the house looking like that?" maybe "ugly people should wear more clothing" and sometimes even "you can't just put on a dress and be a drag queen." After the club closed, we went to the 24 hour café next

door, got some chips and salsa and talked to all the waiters and patrons, all still buzzing from the club and the liquor.

It was here that I first kissed a gay boy. But it was nothing; a drunken dash, a joke, a way to freak out Greg. Someone would drag me to the floor to dance and sing to Christina Aguilera's "Beautiful" and a kiss would happen like a handshake. We'd laugh it off and keep singing.

They closed the club for remodeling and Greg transferred schools. By the time my senior year started, I was living in a house close to campus. I was more interested in on-campus parties and gossiping with my roommates than I was gay clubs and driving. I could buy my own beer and have my own parties.

But any and every gay boy on campus had been drawn to me. There was Zach, who was too shy for the clubs, but came over to my house with Queer As Folk DVDs. We'd order pizza and replay the sex scenes. As my roommates walked past the living room, we hooked them with the show. Pretty soon they were stealing my phone to call Zach, asking him to bring them over so they could delay studying and paper writing to watch Brian and Justin get it on in an office, a bathroom, an empty apartment.

I got a dog and the gay magnetism got worse. Walking him across campus I met Andrew, who started talking and ended up coming out. In our first conversation.

"I think I might be gay...But I don't want to...I don't know."

"You don't have to know right now, Andrew. It's OK to not know."

"My mom would...."

"Don't think about that right now. What are you thinking?"

"I think it might be something I want to do. I think that I want to, you know, be with a guy."

"OK."

"I am supposed to like girls."

"You're not supposed to anything Andrew."

Pretty soon, I was desensitized to everything gay. Not just condoms, but lubricant and laxatives. Ways to wash sin out of silk, cotton, denim and hair. Their drama—hook-ups, break-ups, blow-jobs in backseats, moms walking in—becomes my drama. And everything in my life gets swirled into the background. I am called a breeder and a fag hag. I join PRIDE and throw parties only for gays on campus.

Greg is never gone. He comes to stay with me at school over a weekend and we try to cram all of our rituals into two days. Late night tacos, drunken dancing (this time at a frat house rather than a gay club), pizza, crime TV, gossip and gay drama. I help him sort out a relationship by getting in the middle of it.

"I don't know what he thinks or what he wants. I don't know what to do."  
Greg said.

"Give me the damn phone." I reached out my hand.

"No, no... You don't have to."

"Give me the damn phone."

I search his phone memory for Michael. I find three Michaels—not surprising since everyone at gay clubs wants to be friends forever and we all drunkenly exchange numbers we'll never dial—and ask which Michael. ....

"Oh, it's under Hot Boy M."

"What?" I say, hardly able to get out through the laughter.

"I already had three fucking Michaels. I don't even know who the fuck they are. I needed something so I wouldn't get him confused with people I don't know. Shut-up. Stop laughing."

I scroll through again, and finding "Hot Boy M," I hit dial.

"Greg. I was wondering when you'd call."

"Sorry, not Greg. This is—"

"I know who this is. His friend. What's up?" He's nice enough, but clearly disappointed that I'm not Hot Boy G.

"Just seeing what's up, you know. What's going on. I guess Greg is pretty confused about stuff between you guys...I don't want to get all up in the middle," a clear lie, "but sometimes a third party can help sort things out."

With Greg whispering things in the background, and Michael starting to cry, I wonder if the third party was really even necessary. But someone else's problems are easier; they require less personal revelation.

Greg and Michael broke up a few months later, after casual dating and sex that “didn’t work.” And once again, I’ve got Michael on the phone—this time mine—crying about Greg.

At the end of the year my friend Austin—someone I’ve known since I was a sophomore—comes up to me at a party. We are sitting in a backyard, under a tree talking about how silly sorority girls act in groups. His ride comes to get him, and he tells them he’s almost ready. He looks at me...he stares at me. I look at him and lower my eyebrows. He leans in, and I can feel his breath. I get nervous; I think about all the times we’ve talked, all the signs I’ve missed that he likes me. I think about late nights studying in the student center, trips to IHOP, talks about our lives, how close we’ve become. His lips pass mine and get next to my ears. I close my eyes and anticipate what’s coming. And suddenly, he sighs. He’s nervous, too.

“I have to tell you... something... important...” he says, “something that you may already have guessed... I... I mean... I’m gay.” He shoots up, glances at me and runs away, into the backdoor of the house, past the windows.

I graduate from college, and the gay club in Dallas is still closed. They stopped remodeling it and are moving it down the block, redesigning it, renaming it, postponing the opening until December. That same summer my best friend Brian left for the Air Force and the hope I’d been harboring for our eventual Meg Ryan/Tom Hanks future was finally dashed.

In August, I move to a town where I know no one, to go to graduate school. The only people I have are my boys—willing to drive two hours to watch TV and sleep on my couch with my snoring dog. Occasionally, I'd drive to Greg's or Zach's or Andrew's apartments to sleep on their couches with my snoring dog. But gay boys won't let you sulk over an ex for long.

So, we're back out, hitting the bars.

First the bar across the street from my new house. Greg and I walk in.

"Our goal is for you to find some friends here."

"Whatever."

The night goes on with Miller Lite and shots of Pucker. We look around. Greg invents a game that can help me meet people.

"OK, we'll guess people's names and then walk up and ask them what their name actually is and then see which one of us is closer, then tell them about the game and start a conversation."

"Mmm. Do you teach elementary school or day care?"

"Shut-up. This is fun."

"It will be. One minute." I pick up my bottle of beer in one hand and my shot in the other. I dump the shot down my throat and swallow. I put the beer to my lips and tilt my head back. Bottoms up, literally. Once the beer was empty, I bought another.

"OK, now I'll play."

I guessed Mark, Jerome, Anthony and Marisa. Marisa was almost right for Maria, but none of these spurred conversation further than the explanation of the game and a laugh. And then—in a paisley shirt, ironed pants and Kenneth Cole shoes—struts past me what I can only deem a super-fag. He is sipping his draft beer from a straw, and stopping to talk to everyone in the bar. I point at him to Greg.

“William.” I say.

“Damn it. I have nothing to beat that. OK, Justin.”

I wave super-fag over to the table and he slides into the chair next to me, grabs my fingers and kisses the top of my hand.

“We’re playing this game, where we guess people’s names and then see who got closer. Greg here guessed Justin. I guessed William.”

“Oh my god,” he screamed. “My name is William! My name is William!”

“Well, I’ve been calling you super-fag,” I said, as I flicked his straw with my cigarette-free hand. He just laughed and repeated the phrase.

“Super fag. Hmmm... I guess it is kind of weird to drink beer with a straw, huh?”

“Not to me,” Greg said.

We introduced ourselves, and exchanged basic information. I started thinking about how this was nice, this guy could be my friend, but I couldn’t just ask him to be my friend and take me out and call me all the time.

"William, she doesn't have any friends here." Greg said. Always reading my mind.

"Give me your number. Oh my god! I totally need you!" William said.

"OK." I looked up at Greg, and he just nodded. His work was done.

Weeks later, I am at my second party with William. We meet his friend Brad there. Brad and I hit it off as well, and spend the entire night smoking on the back porch and sneaking into the kitchen.

We stole too many sips of hidden whiskey. Stumbling around on the porch, we stumbled into one another and my face sunk into his chest. I look up at him and he leans in to me. It was sloppy and fast; we both tasted of stale smoke and cheap whiskey. He laughed our faces away from each other and sat back down, commencing our conversation on how too many people listen to Modest Mouse now.

Two weeks later, Greg and I go to Homecoming at our old school. Austin is there, along with some gay freshman boys he's picked up as friends the first few months of the semester. He tries to keep them from me—he knows of the magnetism and he wants to keep me to himself. There is Joshua, who goes by Shue; there is Matt who goes by Matt. Matt and I sneak around the corner and start to talk about Austin, gay boys on campus for Matt to date, shoes, how black and brown don't match but people seem to think they do, how much we hate and love Anna Nicole and how silly girls can be. The drunker we get, the



more we hang on each other. By the third party of the night, Matt and I need each other to hold ourselves up. We've decided to get married just as Greg is helping Austin make it to the bathroom.

The four of us go back to Austin's apartment to make a pizza and sleep it off. Austin throws the pizza in the oven and we turn on a movie. First Matt gets up and walks into the hallway. After 10 minutes have passed, I get up to investigate, find him in the bed and crawl in. We giggle for a few minutes and all of a sudden, it's happening again. Laughing, we put our faces together, and we kiss. And it's comforting. But I am scared of this false comfort—this attention that takes me nowhere—and fall backward and fall asleep. Austin soon comes into his bedroom and demands a place in his own bed to sleep. We pretend to sleep through his demands, and then we sleepily whine our way out. We refuse to move; we pout; we protest.

The next night Matt and I find each other at another party. Matt plops down next to me and I smile at him.

"So, Austin is pissed," he says.

"What? Because we wouldn't let him in his own bed?"

"Well, not just that. He apparently told Kevin that I was stealing you away from him, and that you were his friend first and he resents the fact that you have been talking to me more than him or something. Whatever. So boring."

"Austin is such a fucking queen," I say and take a sip of beer from my red plastic cup.

"Where did you get the cup? I found the keg, but not the cups." Matt said.

"They might be out. Find one on the ground and go rinse it out."

"Ew. No. You do that and give me your cup."

"Ew. No."

"Fine," he said as he stood up. As he walks off, Austin walks over. He just looks at me and walks away. Right to Kevin.

"Such a queen," I say to no one.

I walk toward the back of the house, and find Greg. I run this newest line of drama past him and he hatches a plan. In fact, all he has to say is "when Austin sees you—pull a Brad." I nod.

"You find Hot Boy A and I'll find Hot Boy M," I say.

I get Matt to the front porch and we are sitting on a bench that was once a van's backseat. Seatbelts still attached.

"OK, when we see Austin, we're going to really piss him off. Teach him to be a queen."

"What are we going to do?"

"You'll see. Let's all be surprised but me and Greg."

"That's hot."

Once Greg and Austin climb the steps up the porch, I reach over and pull Matt toward me. Our faces an inch apart, he looks into my eyes and smiles. He grabs the back of my head and pushes my face into his. Between kisses, I

whisper quick questions in his ear: "Is he looking?" "Can Austin see?" "What is he doing?" And Matt quickly answers "yes," "yes," "staring... trying not to look." But even after Austin walked away, Matt and I kept going. We laughed the whole way, until Greg walked up.

"Eww... stop...it's gross now."

One month later, at the end of November. Greg and I talk everyday, and are spending most weekends together at a bar near the almost open new gay club in Dallas. In this world, traditions are set in a day. If we do it one Friday, we must do it the next. We run into people we used to see at the club. We meet new people to talk to and drink with. We go out on the balcony, look down onto the street and talk about the impending grand opening. I see Justin—who I once had to carry out of the club because he was drunk enough to sit in my lap and sing "Come What May" from Moulin Rouge three times. I see Kirk—who used to buy me drinks when I was underage. We share a chair and catch up. He introduces me to his date Mike. Greg follows a cute boy downstairs and Kirk disappears to get us all more drinks. Mike goes to follow Kirk to make sure he doesn't forget what we want. I find Greg and we find a table. Twenty minutes later, I see Mike walking around, looking almost lost. I wave him over and all of a sudden he is kissing me, I am kissing him. Hands are going everywhere. We break only to smile at each other.

Soon Kirk shows up with drinks and he and Mike wander off. I don't think much about the kiss, until I wonder if Mike is walking around a gay bar with lipstick on his face. I go look for him. I see him across a crowd and slink my way over. He doesn't see me, so I sneak up on him. He is lipstick free and I walk away, not letting him know I was checking.

I get another beer, and start talking to boys who are so thrilled by my "double fisting" that they get me to chug both beers in about three minutes. In the end, everyone ends up on the same area of the patio—me, Greg, Mike, Kirk, boys that want me to chug, even Justin and the boy Greg was chasing. If this bar scene is a play, we appear to be lining up for our curtain call. Too bad we haven't gotten to the end. I am talking to Justin and chug-it boys, and Mike is talking to Kirk, Greg and his new crush go dance—Christina is playing. Every time Mike and I make eye contact, he saunters over to me, grabs me, and kisses me—really kisses me.

He hasn't shaved in at least 12 hours. He presses his face against mine harder. He bites my bottom lip. His left hand rubs my neck; his right runs through my short hair. He tastes like Winterfresh gum, so strongly that my tongue is searching for it in his mouth. His body is pressed against mine; my hand on his back draws him closer. Our noses graze as we move our heads from one side to another. As our pulses race, our pace becomes quicker. The bar swirls around us. I can see people watching as I peek over his ear.

As long as we are kissing, all I think of is our lips, our hands and our bodies. Not of the lipstick I am smearing on his face. Not of the voices or the music. Not of my friends lost on the dance floor. Not of everything broken in my life. Only of me, kissing a boy. Only a boy, kissing me back.

## I Am Allowed To Say Faggot.

You're not. You probably can't even read this story out loud.

But I can say faggot. I'm neither gay nor a man, but I can still say faggot.

Because there has been, in my life, exactly one person who I thought I could spend my life with. When I met Chris, I thought it would be possible. To love him. Or whatever. When he took me to a Mavs game, I hoped it would be. Our first date dinner was at a taco stand and for almost as long as I knew Chris, I never once doubted that we could be together forever. He'd stay out late with his guy friends, he'd poke my nose because he knew it bothered me, he'd try to put his hand up my shirt at the movies. But even when I wanted to throw things at him, even when I once threw a half-full can of peanuts at him, it was always possible, probable.

Chris loved the loud me. That me who always feels like I have to entertain people. The Abby Show.

He loved the erratic me. The one who would panic about the 30 things I had to get done but who just sat there, not doing them. Who just sat there, watching re-runs of Friends. Or worse, dragging out the Friends DVDs.

He loved me when I tried to make tea by putting water and a tea bag in a mug and then setting the mug directly on the stove.

Chris laughed at all of my jokes. When I changed my parents' ringtone on my cell phone to the James Bond theme because they were always trying to spy

on me, he laughed. And that's not even very funny. He thought it was funny when I tried to sing along to Tupac, or when I tried to dance to techno music. I guess that's really just more of the Abby Show.

Chris didn't care that I was always late, that I occasionally tried to punch him in the face for waking me up, that I showed affection for my dog endlessly and rarely even seemed excited to see him, my human boyfriend.

Chris even loved drunk Abigail. This meant crying phone calls about how no one loved me, crying phone calls because I was lost 45 yards from my own house. This meant a loud voice, loud laughter, slamming drinks around the bar. This meant me walking by the pool table, moving all the balls around, when he was engaged in a serious game with his best dude friend. Drunk Abby, then, also meant a fair amount of throwing up, passing out in frat houses and forgetting to call him for days.

He missed me during the week, but he knew telling me that would make me feel weird so he never said it. He was excited to see me on the weekends and never once pushed coming to my house at school because he just knew I didn't want to mix my going to lunch at the caf and drinking friends with my 24 year-old boyfriend. I didn't want questions from them about him, from him about them. But I never once had to say it.

His affection made me uncomfortable and I often tried to sabotage us. I told him to go fuck himself more times than I can count. Every time, it seemed like he deserved it, but now I get it. I wanted him to say it back. Confirm my

theories that all people will eventually get tired of me, that my novelty will wear off. And a punch to the face is just easier to walk away from than a loving embrace.

But people could see the Chris on my face. The way I would smile and try to hide it behind my hand. The way I didn't have to drink a beer every afternoon when I walked home from class. The way I didn't hate strangers for no reason. It was that, that people could see the Chris on me, that made me realize that us staying together was not merely possible, it was probably a good idea.

And it would have been a good idea. It could have been perfect. If it weren't for that one little word, and of course, what made him say it.

"Hey you, what are you up to?" I said into the phone one afternoon, walking across campus to dinner.

"Oh, probably just going to go see my brother and then watch TV. I gotta be at work at, like, 8," Chris said.

"Oh yeah? That sucks."

"What about you?"

"Having dinner with Brooke, then me and Rob are probably going to go over to Mike's house to have some beers and watch some movies."

"Another night with the faggots, huh?"

"Yeah, another night with the faggots, Chris," I said, laughing.



"Call me after dinner?"

"Sure thing."

"Love ya."

"Yeah," I paused here for him to have time to imagine me saying it back, since I wasn't going to actually let the words come out of my mouth. "Call you then."

Brooke and I were walking into the Campus Center. She turned right into the empty mailroom. I opened my box; she opened hers.

"He says faggots?" Brooke asked.

"What?" I asked, confused, wondering how she'd heard him, then remembering that I'd repeated it back. "Yeah, I guess because I do."

"I sometimes can't believe you say it, but, OK. But Chris? That seems weird."

"Not really, you know how I mean it. It's like when I call you and say 'Hey Bitch.'"

"Yeah. Yeah."

When Brooke and I walked into the caf, we saw some of our friends at one of the big, round tables so we set our purses down and got in line. I got in line for a custom-made burrito and Brooke got in the pasta line, so we didn't meet back up until the salad bar. She didn't say anything then about it, but once we'd gotten our sodas and sat down at our table, she said to our friends, "Abby's boyfriend says faggot." When Mike laughed and Kim choked on her Coke trying

to, Brooke dropped it. She was the only one making a big deal, so she cited herself as the crazy one.

My three best friends in college were all gay men. Rob, who I tried to spend every minute with; Matt who had the nice, clean apartment and the New York fag attitude; and Mike, who was always at my house because he still lived in the dorms and his roommate played football. When I called Brooke or Kim, I said "Hey bitch," and when I called Rob or Mike, I said "Hey fag." It was all the same to me. They were equally inappropriate words that I loved saying because I was 20.

After dinner, when I called Chris, I asked him about it.

"Brooke can't believe that you say faggot," I said.

"Why? A faggot's a faggot's a faggot." And it was then that I heard the something in his voice when he said it. Something that was never in mine when I said it. His "faggot" sounded more like my racist's aunt's "lazy wetback." It was dismissive.

I stopped walking. I reached in my purse for a cigarette and couldn't find one so I started digging with both hands, losing track of my phone in the purse. I dug furiously until I found a cigarette and a lighter. I lit my cigarette, dropped my lighter back into my purse and then remembered that I had been holding a phone but that I wasn't anymore, so I went back into the purse for it.

"Sorry. Dropped you. What did you say?"

"Nothing."

"You getting ready to go to Dave's?" I asked.

"Yeah, but let's talk for a minute. Tell me about your day."

"Lyndon and I decided that since they only have one ceramics class, that we're just going to see if Dr. Bob will let us sign up for independent studies with him next semester so that we can get credit for working with each other," I said. Lyndon, of course being a non-threatening "fag."

"That's awesome babe." I choked on my smoke when he said that last word, "babe." I was even more uncomfortable with his affection now. The way he threw words around without realizing their meaning. The way he could love me, knowing who my friends are, and still act the way he does.

"Hey I have to go, Kim is calling me and she wanted to borrow something. Call me after Dave's?"

"Yeah... OK..."

Kim wasn't calling me and Kim didn't want to borrow anything. I had to get off the phone; I couldn't pretend. I walked through our front yard, dropping my cigarette. When I walked into the house, Whitney, my roommate was sitting on the couch, eating Hershey's Kisses. She always unwrapped the whole bag before she ate a single one, and so when I walked in, there she was, pile of foil wrappers on the coffee table, bag of naked Kisses in her lap, and she was popping handfuls into her mouth, letting the chocolate mush into a massive ball in her mouth. She, of course, then opened her mouth.

"Waasss gon on?"

"What?"

She mashed and mashed, like an old lady eating without her teeth in. I stood there staring at her. I finally parted my lips and let out a laugh. She swallowed once. Twice.

"What's going on? You look ready to punch someone. Well, you did, until I started eating my ball of brown goo."

I laughed again.

"Chris calls people faggots."

"So do you."

"Yeah, but not in the same way."

"Oh." Was all she said before she threw more Kisses into her mouth. She patted the couch, picked up and shook her pack of smokes. She held it out to me. I grabbed the lighter off the edge of the table as I sat down next to her. I, of course, had to wait for Whitney to finish the only meal she'd eat that week, for her to ask what I was going to do.

"Ignore it? Doesn't that sound like a good plan? Pretend like it's not going on? Like I don't get it?"

"Yeah, Ab, sounds like a great plan."

"We'll see how it works."

I didn't answer when Chris called that night. My cell phone was closed up in my bedroom by then, while Whitney and I smoked cigarettes, watched Friends, drank an entire bottle of Malibu and pretended like nothing was going

on. Self-destructive friends come in handy. They're uncomfortable with affection, relationships, words that have real meaning. They work better with sarcasm, indulgence, acting without consideration of consequence. Whitney was what I needed.

For a while, I avoided Chris while trying to think of ways to tell him that I couldn't, well, honestly, I don't know. I couldn't something. I didn't trust myself. It wasn't that big of a deal, that word. I was imagining the malice. I was just doing it again, just sabotaging myself, our relationship.

That week, Mike told me that some people are just ignorant and without other around to set them straight, as it were, they'd always be that way.

"My parents were homophobes until they realized they loved a gay person, and then it was like, gay people can't be all that bad. I mean, it wasn't that easy. You know. But, boiled down, that's what happened," he said.

So that was my plan, to show him. Talk about how good Rob always is to me. Not say faggot. Talk about gay people like people first. Assume nothing. Start at the very beginning. Show him. So I did that for a few months. Until we got married. Fake married, in a bar.

Rob gave me away; the jukebox played a song as I walked down the aisle between the bar and the bathrooms. I took a shot the minute I said "I do." Our wedding rings were made of the rectangular labels peeled off our Miller Lite longnecks. Mine was still taped around my finger the next morning when I woke up in his bed; it reminded me of what I had drunkenly forgotten.

We'd spent the evening at the bar, paper rings on, staring at each other. Him pretending that our marriage was real, me pretending that he wasn't hateful and ignorant. If it wasn't for that word, maybe I never would have had to know. There were moments that night when I felt the way I'd felt before. There were moments where I felt that hope, that he'd learn. That he'd look up at Rob and see Rob. There were moments where I still felt like he could really be it. There were moments when I thought that I was crazy for doubting him, when he looked into my eyes and I realized I was just afraid and looking for a way out. No one else had ever looked at me like that, like he was looking at a bright light far away. I'd struggled so hard to let him look at me like that without laughing or walking away or starting a fight or, my favorite, saying something stupid. I wanted someone to look at me like that forever. I wanted him to.

The next morning, we woke up with our hands finding each other's, our fingers flicking the paper rings. He wanted it to be real, he wanted it now. I wanted to finish going to college and drinking and watching Whitney go for days without food or sleep. I thought I would fall apart without the parties, the late nights. I thought my friends would fall apart without me to hold the world together around them. I thought Whitney would fall apart without me to remind her that sometimes, people sleep. I wanted him to smile and rub my head and tell me he wasn't going anywhere, but when he did, I was afraid.

"I can't believe Rob gave me away," I said, laughing a little, trying to be funny.

"Yeah." He turned over.

"What?"

"I don't get it."

"What?"

"Well, all guys like their own dicks. I just think maybe guys like Rob, you know, like their own so much they think they like other people's, too." He said. Because he thought it would be OK.

And I laughed. I actually laughed. I just didn't know what to do. But he wasn't kidding and I laughed. That was his actual theory on homosexuality. And I laughed a little. Blew it off. Got up, got dressed, made us some toast. Lit a cigarette. Watched movies with him all day. Cuddled with him on the couch. Let him rub my head, let him kiss me. I just didn't know what else to do. My mind was full and it was busy trying subdue my urge to scream, kick, run. It was busy keeping that misplaced fear at bay. I'd been so afraid of building and having something real. Now I was afraid of leaving it. I had to be sure I wasn't playing a trick on myself.

I thought I was being strong, overcoming my fear. And it didn't take long for me to figure out exactly what I had to do. Walk away from the genuine embrace, the first one I'd ever been open enough to accept, from the first person who wouldn't let me sabotage it. Just walk away. Maybe I lived my life as a comedy act, maybe I was trying to live the Abigail Show and entertain and

make everyone around me forget about all the real things weighing them down. But I couldn't make myself forget anymore. So I walked away.

Two months later, when I was out drinking with Rob and Matt and Mike and Rob's boyfriend, we saw Chris. We were at one of Chris's favorite bars, the bar behind a car dealership, the bar where he and I got married. I walked up to the bar to get a drink and he walked up to me. He pointed at my empty bottle and ordered two Miller Lites.

"I miss you," he said.

"Well, I miss you," I said. "Sometimes a lot."

"Especially in this place," he said.

"Yeah. Rob's going to come over here in, like, 2 minutes to make sure everything's OK, you know?"

"Yeah," he said.

"So I should get back over there. It's Mike's birthday." A lie. A reason to walk away that wasn't him pushing or me pulling.

I turned to leave.

"Hey, Abby?"

"Yeah?" I asked, hoping for so many things.

"You know... Hanging out with faggots isn't going to get you laid."

I loved him more than I had known that I could. He was it for me except for that one little word and, of course, what made him say it.



"Thanks, Chris."

"For what?"

"The beer." And the punch in the face.

Dear Boy,

Depending on the day, Kate's life was either effortless or a disaster. Some days, her messy house, the work she brought home, her friends drifting in and out of her life—none of it bothered her. She only saw her boyfriend Josh who wasn't perfect but was closer than her last. Those mornings, she saw not the people in her life who she couldn't call or who would be unconcerned with whatever she had to say. But not today. Today, just coming downstairs to the mess, her head was already full of what she should have done last night, last week, all month. There was a vague cloud of worry, lacking any tangible point of action. Like a list her mind was reading through so quickly, she couldn't grasp any one thing. Today, looking at her phone, she rolled her eyes at Josh's morning "wake-up and smile" text message; she hated her friend Ginny who was probably too drunk last night to remember to call her back. So, today, she stood in the shower and sobbed.

Kate graduated from high-school and then Kate graduated from college. She got a job as a corporate recruitment researcher. Some days, she never wanted to leave work, but when work was hard or when work was confusing, she wanted to take countless smoke breaks and the hours slowed down. She never liked being confused, or at least admitting to it, so she put up a front and sat at her desk not knowing what to do but somehow doing it.

Kate's friends were mostly the ones she made in college classes or at dead-end retail jobs that go hand-in-hand with college. They were fun-time

friends; she was almost always alone when she was sad, when she was broken-hearted. There was Ginny, whose favorite place was a rooftop bar and whose favorite word was “shot,” preferably yelled. There was Beth, who went from guy to guy seemingly without pause; Kate had long stopped trying to remember their names. She had pseudo-intellectual friends, the pot-head philosopher types. Other than her geographically distant parents, older sister and best friend, she had that boyfriend Josh who surprised her everyday with his patience and his uncanny knowledge of exactly what to say.

Somedays after work, Kate drives around her suburb looking for just the right place. Sometimes she stops at a grocery store parking lot, other times she chooses a park or a mall. Though she’s never found what she was looking for, she knows the best places to look are places where there are always a lot of people. Once, she scoured the grounds after an outdoor graduation ceremony.

The grocery store itself yields only grocery lists, and though they have potential, they are always disappointing. Carrots and cans of soup rather than dildos and diapers. The best thing she ever found at a park was a marked up copy of a Dave Eggers book, and despite how interesting she found the passages selected for highlighting and the notes made in the margins and at chapters’ ends, a book would never do. She hated looking at malls because people always looked at her like she’s crazy: why would anyone pick up every little lost piece of paper? She found a lot of receipts at malls, a lot of torn-off tags and movie ticket

stubs. She sometimes found notes that never got her anywhere. She hated how self-involved people were, how they would write down the most unimportant things, how they dramatized boring break-ups and ordinary things. She needed something outrageous, something strange and yet believable, something that would make her famous.

She could still remember when the idea struck her. After work one day, she walked into a bookstore. She could smell the books and the brewing coffee. Crisp paper. There were children screaming in the back of the store.

She hated the people in bookstores; the suburban moms and the dads with loosened ties. Being in a book store doesn't make you smart, but Kate knew that people liked to be able to say they had gone "over to the bookstore." Yeah, you're a regular genius, hanging out in home-improvement. Still don't know who Shakespeare is, didn't he write Huck Finn? Kate knew she belonged there, she wanted to live there, she grew nervous when she found more books she wanted than she could afford. She hated her job, her years in school, her addiction to prime-time TV. When she was in the bookstore, all she ever wanted to do was read and all she was afraid of was forgetting all the books she wanted.

To find a really good book, she sought guidance from the pages of magazines that she trusted. Writers whose stories appear in *The Atlantic Monthly* probably wrote great books. She saw a magazine named *Lost & Find*, and angered by the assumed typo or bad translation, she picked it up. She had mistaken clever for an error. And it was clever. There were short short stories,

non-fiction essays, articles about weird places to visit. The magazine seemed to be centered on the notion that the best things in the world are drifting around, either hidden by commercialism or lost by an unknowing soul. Authors who have never been published, places that have been under-explored, news stories that are buried under political disasters. The magazine's biggest section, and in Kate's opinion the best, was called "Found It On The Ground: Find It In The Grind."

Most popular in this section were notes left on people's cars: "What are you doing here? I saw you walk in. You walk just fine. Have some fucking respect for people who have trouble walking and get the fuck out of their spaces. Why do you think they give them spaces? FOR FUN? Who gave you the god-damn write to park here? Your crippled grandma?" There was a to do list that included things like paying tuition and catching up on homework as well as hiding guns and getting medication. Notes written by children were featured: tickets for funny stories and apologies for telling lies about a dead fish. Pictures of children with devil horns expertly drawn over a blond girl's head. Break-up notes galore: one that repeats "was it really that bad" over the course of three pages, one that reads "is this because I kicked you that one time?" and one that said "I WILL KEY YOUR CAR IF ITS EVER PARKED NEAR MY HOUSE."

Kate fell in love with people's anger, their secrets, their anonymity, the things they'd never expect anyone else to read. She fell in love with the way their whole lives had been concentrated; she fell in love with the directness, the specificity. They weren't experiencing hazy masses of anxiety and self-doubt;

their biggest problem wasn't trying to figure out what their biggest problem was. Whoever wrote these notes were sure of what they felt.

Under each entry, there was a story sent by the finder about where it was found and when and what they thought it meant. Then the finder's name and their city and state. Notes found tucked inside library books and others under the cushion of a second-hand couch. Sometimes, Kate thought, those little paragraphs gave the piece all of its meaning. If the note about illegally (and immorally) parking in handicapped spots was found in the pocket of a jacket in a thrift store, it means something different than if it was found on the ground in a shopping center lot. Context.

She bought the magazine that day and she didn't even look for a book. Unbothered by the forgotten novels, she walked out into the parking lot. Already, she was looking as she walked back to her car.

"Combination. Juxtaposition, that's what makes them the best," Kate said to Josh one night while showing him the latest, her third, issue.

"You think that's it?" He asked her, twirling her hair.

"Yeah, I mean, this to-do list is great because it has both 'hide guns' and 'get medication,' the combination of the two is where all of your conclusions about this guy come from, you know?" She asked; he nodded, still looking into her eyes. "Hide guns is funny, especially for a to-do list but when get medication is listed, that's where you start thinking about those guys."

"I guess so," he said, looking into her and half-smiling. She sat up from leaning her head on his chest.

"What?"

"I don't know. You think about this, like, deeply."

"Yeah, I mean, I know."

"I'm not making fun of you,"

"I just think it's really interesting, is all. I mean, they're artifacts, you know, of life. And the only thing that really makes them timeless is that they are based on the assumption that they are temporary."

"Yeah, I get it. If they'd been made on purpose..."

"They would be worthless," Kate said, putting her head this time on his stomach.

Whenever Kate doubted their relationship, thought of their fights and his flippant replies, the way he rolled his eyes when she got upset, she often dismissed it as fear, unnecessary worry. Then, of course, she would wonder if she was dismissing the wrong things—if their compatibility was superficial, based primarily on pop culture analysis.

He wrapped his arm around her and she let the magazine fall to the ground as he tickled her and she squirmed. Giggling, she thought that maybe no one would understand her obsession, not even Josh, who understood and shared so many of her others. Not just TV but the shows, not just books but the authors, not just movies but the directors, the actors, the cinematography and

lighting even. They thought the same jokes were funny, even when no one else did. But this, these mementos of something real and something honest, something bare and something simple, he acknowledged these with only a passing interest. As her interest in them gained with time, his waned. Kate knew that Josh saw this as her passing novelty obsession, and it wore on them.

That night, they watched *Arrested Development* and Kate laughed with her mouth wide open. At the commercial break, Josh sat forward and took Kate's head with him. He reached for the open pack of cigarettes, perched on the edge of her crowded coffee table. He pulled one out with his mouth and held the open pack toward Kate. She took one and smiled in thanks; he lit them both with the same match. He shook the match until the puff of smoke floated up and he threw the match into her ashtray. He leaned back and Kate stretched out her legs and leaned into Josh with her head.

"Why can't every show be this funny?" Josh asked. He asked this often.

"I don't know. Because people would rather watch *Raymond* and not have to think or remember or extend anything outside of their realm of what is comfortable and wholly familiar."

"Wow, yeah," he said.

"She's always mad cause he won't do dishes and he is always trying to sneak out to play golf. I mean JESUS. How fucking old is that joke?"



Kate was comfortable there, wrapped in his arms and nestled on his stomach. She liked the way he looked down at her, the way his hands felt in her hair. She liked best though, the singular moments that said everything.

So she searched, for someone else's moving moment, exasperated gasp, confused head shake. She found nothing but dozens of worthless scraps. Nothing with meaning. Nothing that did anything for her. Her magazine came in the mail every month and she started to hate these other people who, assumingly by total accident, had been able to find what she'd been searching for. James in Winston-Salem who found a card that accompanied a floral arrangement that merely read "Come clean or you'll regret it." Deborah in Chicago who found a break-up note intended for someone who had a similar silver Honda. Mark in Omaha who found a mean and spiteful note that said first "fuck you" and then "PS Page me later." They were all Kate's sworn rivals and enemies. Why were these people finding remnants of amazing moments and the best she could yet do was a note that read "make a copy for Mark... best movie ever!" These people just walked out to their cars and found, found something. Now they were here in her hands and her house, now she had heard of them.

It took her three months to find best-movie-ever. She sent it because she was dying to send something. A few weeks later, as a consolation for not getting published, she received a free copy of an issue she already had.

"They don't even know I already get the magazine," she said to Josh when she saw her prize.

"That's pretty funny."

She rolled her eyes and threw the magazine on the pile.

She went to work, watched TV and went shopping for CDs; she even took a trip to visit her parents. She thought maybe their suburb would be more fruitful; big surprise, it was exactly the same. Kate had good moments and bad days. Sometimes, when she was looking, she became overwhelmed by the rush of thoughts that she should be cleaning her house, getting ready for her vacation; she should be looking over that research for work, she should be making those phone calls for her mom. She sometimes felt foolish for making a point to go searching; don't other people have real lives and do real things? She worried about people seeing her; she worried about, sometimes she didn't even know.

The search, like most things, lost its comfort. She did it because the longer she went without it, the more she'd convince herself she was screwing it up, missing something great. She walked through parking lots, around her alma mater's campus, through parks. She walked to the gas station, even got too close to smelly dumpsters behind Chinese restaurants.

She crossed a public parking lot and found the purple note. She almost didn't pick it up; it was dirty and she was sure it would be worthless, blank even. But it wasn't. It was perfect. Dramatic but real.

Kate's feet hurt but she had found a winner. She'd found a piece of purple paper half-buried in parking lot sludge that read "Dear Boy, When you never called me, I cut myself for five days even though I only knew you for one night. You know who I am..." Kate wondered if the boy had ever even seen this note: maybe he'd thrown it away or maybe it had blown off of his car or out of his hands. She wondered if he'd see it now.

She walked home, not caring that the muddy message was smearing gunk all over the inside of her pants pocket. The soles of her feet were sore and she could feel the impending blisters of walking too long in cheap flip-flops.

Kate thought about the girl. The author, the one with the scars. The purging of one girl's week of grief, her handing the weight back to its rightful bearer. Kate might have even been jealous that this anonymous girl had access to her emotions, that she could have a real moment and experience a real feeling. The note was muddy but the sentiment clear.

She called Josh but he didn't answer. She sat down to try and compose her paragraph of meaning, the context she would provide. Would she just give facts or would she speculate about the receiver? Would she guess that it was stuck to his car and never read? She went through draft after draft. Josh called her back and he failed to share her excitement.

"That's cool babe," he said.

"Yeah it's cool!"

"Yeah... so what else did you do today?"

He was making her feel crazy. She wanted to celebrate, he didn't seem to care. They agreed to have dinner later and she grabbed a cigarette and her pen. She thwacked the pen against the notebook so hard that the cap went flitting through the air. She wrote a version that just gave the facts, one that said "Found in a parking lot near a retail area in my college town. The note probably flew off this guy's windshield before he ever saw it. Wonder if he even remembers the one night?"

Too speculative, too intrusive. She wished she could fingerprint the note and find the author, the receiver. Maybe there was residue on it that pointed to what kind of windshield wiper it was wedged under or where the note had traveled from.

She tried again. But all she could write was

"Dear boy, When you twirl my hair and laugh with me, when we're smoking cigarettes or running errands, I feel like we are a pair. When you can't even bother to fake excitement, I feel like I don't like you. When you're gone, it hurts, but maybe because I miss you or maybe because I don't. Am I waiting for you to flee or am I looking for my own way out?"